

Theater: 'Elephant Man' Opens

By RICHARD EDER

"ELEPHANT MAN," that haunting parable about natural man trading his frail beauty and innocence for the protection and prison of society, has made a splendid move to Broadway.

Bernard Pomerance's play, with its array of shining performances, opened last night at the Booth Theater. It survives its transfer from its earlier showing at the Theater of St. Peter's Church with no dilution of its character. If anything, it has been strengthened.

While Philip Anglim, as the deformed innocent, is as remarkable as ever, Carole Shelley's witty and passionate performance as the actress who reaches out to him has grown even more exuberant. And as Treves, the idealistic doctor who bestows the protection of civilization upon the deformed man and comes to realize, tragically, how destructive his philanthropy has been, Kevin Conway has turned a fine performance into a towering one.

The Elephant Man after which the play is named was a real person who lived in the latter part of the last century. Hideously deformed, with spongy excrescences growing from his face and body, he was rescued from a freak show and taken into a London hospital. There, thanks to the devotion of his doctors, and an effective publicity campaign, he became an object of public interest and something of a social lion as well.

Mr. Pomerance has used this figure to construct an image of the unspoiled natural man. Like the Kaspar Hauser in Werner Herzog's film, whom he considerably resembles, John Merrick has an uncomfortably pure sense of the good, an instinctive religious aspiration, and a style of thought so unspoiled and direct that he is continually sabotaging the tutored assumptions of his protectors.

The deformity is used not for its own sake but to separate the protagonist from the society he encounters. Mr. Anglim suggests this deformity without makeup. Instead he uses disciplined but fluid contortion of his body and a thickened, halting quality in his speech. Onstage he is a spirit struggling in chains, and the effort gives his lines a transforming energy.

And what lines they are. He is always looking at things either at startlingly close range or at a startling distance. When a nurse hired to tend him flees shrieking from his ugliness he simply thanks Treves, who has taken the precaution of holding on to the tray, for saving his lunch.

When the hospital authorities, determined to protect him from intrusive curiosity, discharge a porter for staring, he seems not to notice the attempted kindness. "If your mercy is so cruel, what must your justice be like?" he asks.

His innocence manages to put in question all the assumptions, the order,

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Kenn Duncan

Philip Anglim in a scene from "The Elephant Man."

the power of a society — the Victorian — that considered itself to have abolished once and for all the age-old dichotomy between doing good and doing well. And yet, like Lear's fool, he is helpless and terrified of being dispossessed from the protection that has been given him.

Treves, played by Mr. Conway with bluff, bursting energy, is a sincere moralist and a sincere success. He is a brilliant doctor and destined for big things. He shows total conviction as he, the Victorian missionary, gradually teaches the Elephant Man to conform to the habits and expectations of society.

But Mr. Pomerance has not given us a prig. Treves is gradually possessed by the magical innocence of his patient, even as the patient becomes attached to the comforts and social advantages of being a scientific celebrity. The doctor begins to realize what is being destroyed. At one point he tells a colleague that the more "normal" the Elephant Man becomes, the more the illness that will kill him is advancing.

What he is saying by implication, and goes on to say more explicitly at the play's end, is that the free and boundless spirit of his patient has been gradually crushed. The Elephant Man gradually loses the questioning vitality he

Based on Real Person

THE ELEPHANT MAN, by Bernard Pomerance. Directed by Jack Hofsis; setting by David Jenkins; costumes by Julie Weiss; lighting by Beverly Lemmons; production stage manager, Pat De Rousie. Presented by Richmond Crinkley, Elizabeth I. McCann and Neile Nugent; associate producers, Ray Larsen and Ted Snowden. At the Booth Theater, 45th Street west of Broadway.

Frederick Treves.....Kevin Conway
Carr Gomm.....Richard Clarke
Ross, Bishop Walsham How and Snork.....I.M. Hobson
John Merrick.....Philip Anglim
Pinhead Manager, London Policeman, Will, Earl and Lord John.....John Neville-Andrews
Pinhead, Miss Sandwich, Countess and Princess Alexandra.....Carole Shelley
Mrs. Kendal and Pinhead.....Carole Shelley
Orderly.....Dennis Creaghan
Cellist.....David Heiss

has at the start. He becomes an internal captive. His energy is channeled, as he sickens, into completing the model of a church. Art, for Mr. Pomerance, is a substitute for the natural grace that we lose in living.

Weaving through this grave and affecting parable are a series of lighter strands. There are the representatives of British society who come to visit the patient, and the freak-show empresario who betrays him at the start and returns, fruitlessly, to beg for help at the end.

I.M. Hobson plays three of the auxiliary characters, each in a totally different style and with equal dexterity. He is an orotund bishop, who discharges his rolling phrases like cannonades, settling his ponderous upper lip back in place after each one. He is a bitter desperate braggart as the empresario, and a sweetly meditative hospital porter. Mr. Hobson will be a candidate not for one but for three supporting actor awards.

The most splendid of these lighter strands is the role of the actress. Carole Shelley is golden and regal, the professional contracted by Treves to visit the deformed man and, using her acting, mask the disgust that every other woman has shown. Miss Shelley practices on Treves four different styles of affectionate treatment, bewitching him and captivating us.

But she goes on, with her grace and her wit, to open up the startling gifts of expression that have been buried in the Elephant Man. And finally she answers the bottled-up sexual longing of the sick man with the most touching of gestures: stripping to the waist for him.

Although the second act has been tightened up since the play was performed at St. Peter's, it is still the weaker portion. In part it is inevitable: the opening up of the Elephant Man is more exciting than his decline. And furthermore many of the themes that are dramatized at the beginning remain to be expounded at the end. They are expounded very well indeed, but some of the play's immediacy flags a bit.

This slowing down is perhaps less a defect than a trait. "Elephant Man" is an enthralling and luminous play. Apart from those already mentioned, credit should be given to the faultless direction by Jack Hofsis, the fine, bleak set by David Jenkins, Julie Weiss's costumes and Beverly Emmons's lighting.